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ABSTRACT

The reminiscences of a professor who has taught writing from junior high through college serve in this paper to illustrate that the beginnings of a teaching career are usually marked by both enthusiasm and, frankly, a good deal of ignorance. Two important lessons for beginning teachers are to learn to respect experienced teachers and to learn to disdain the notion of becoming a "classroom cop." The rigors of teaching writing at a junior college, with 5 sections of 30 students each, can be almost unbelievably mind-numbing and very frustrating. For many teachers, being thrown into such a backbreaking position is the only formal training they will ever receive. The training programs of many graduate schools for their teaching assistants verge on the ludicrous or at least the completely superficial. Over the past two decades, many models of teaching writing and various trends and theories have come and gone, with teachers still wondering and disagreeing about how best to teach writing. Still, numerous writing programs, labs, computer-based teaching models, and other innovations have dazzled practitioners and greatly improved the teaching of writing. Meanwhile, other more traditional aspects of writing, like asking for a finished "product" and teaching rhetoric, continue to hold sway. In the end, perhaps the most difficult lesson to learn is this: writing teachers cannot teach students "how to write." But perhaps they can help students to overcome their fear of writing and to foster a proper attitude toward writing. (HB)

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Retread: the (Re)Shaping of an Untrained Composition Teacher

Donald Wilson

A CAVEAT FOR MY AUDIENCE: THERE IS NO DOCUMENTATION IN THIS PAPER. One of my professional heroes, Leslie Fiedler, said in the Fall, 1991 issue of UB Today , SUNY-Buffalo's alumni magazine, "I've never written a thing with a footnote. I don't look things up much, either. In the Torah it says, He who quotes correctly hastens the coming of the Messiah. So I trust my memory, which isn't always accurate." While I certainly don't equate my memory with that of Doctor Fiedler, I do espouse the principle that there are times not to footnote. Neither do I have any desire to hasten that second coming; hence, this reminiscence.

Several years ago, I delivered an impromptu talk at a statewide convention of English teachers, a compendium of my experiences with teaching composition up until that time. The tone was light, the audience small, and the event ended nearly as quickly as it had begun.

But I found that I had struck a responsive chord in several of the session's participants. In further travels, that same empathy also manifested itself; hence, I'm encouraged to share some of those experiences with you today, in part as a reminiscence, and also, I suppose, as a kind of validation of a large part of my professional life for which I have had no formal training but which has nonetheless absorbed uncounted hours of time, effort and energy.

The process began in the fall of 1962, when I emerged from undergraduate school with a secondary English teaching certificate in my hand and a contract for a teaching job in the local junior high school in my pocket. My first job entailed teaching seventh and eighth graders both English and reading. I was barely prepared for the former, totally unprepared for the latter. But I was young and enthusiastic and I didn't yet know the scope of my own ignorance, so I plunged into my assignments with a will.

Experience came quickly that year, as the days-weeks-months-year dissolved into a blur of homeroom and attendance register, lunch and hall monitoring duties, six preps a day, grammar, punctuation, spelling, an occasional story, a rare paragraph and an even rarer three-paragraph composition. There just wasn't time for more.

I learned two important lessons that year. I acquired a huge respect for those teachers who could function well with junior high

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students--thank God for the school, there WERE some who could--and I discovered that I had no desire to be a classroom cop for the rest of my career. A third lesson hadn't yet sunk in--I didn't actually know what composition really was. But I was still young and enthusiastic; I'd learn.

That spring I went to upstate New York to confirm a summer job and quite literally fell into a junior-college teaching position for the upcoming fall. This, I thought, was my salvation from junior high school. Here I could become a teacher rather than a disciplinarian.

So began the second phase of my initiation into the teaching of composition. The countryside was beautiful, my colleagues were more than congenial, and the workload was backbreaking. I had five sections of "Junior English," as it was euphemistically called, with thirty students per section. My task during the one-year course was to teach them how to write expository prose. Our tools were Corder and Kendall's A College Rhetoric, and a rhetorically-organized reader whose title I've long forgotten. Our syllabus was simple: teach the first halves of both books the first semester, the second halves the second semester. Supplement classes with grammar lessons as needed; require a research paper in the second semester.

That was it.

It was MORE than enough.

I wasn't prepared either for teaching or for reading all of this writing. I spent the first year scrabbling to stay ahead of my students in class, frantically digging my way through the mountains of papers they wrote, all prescribed by the pre-ordained curriculum. I was also learning something about classical rhetoric--thesis-and-support, analysis, classification, comparison, a little classical Latin argumentation, introductions, conclusions, and a host of other things about whose existence I was becoming aware but which in my wildest nightmares I never suspected that I'd have to be responsible for knowing or teaching. After all, this wasn't REALLY 'English'--was it?

Like Thoreau's second year at Walden, my second year was mechanically much like my first. Unlike Henry David, however, I did begin to realize some fairly significant differences between year one and year two. Together those two years form for better or worse most of the "formal" training I have had in the teaching of composition. They were accidentally encountered; they were self-taught. They made me painfully aware of a large area of my ignorance about my own language. But I began to understand better what I was teaching; familiarity with the materials I was teaching was helping me to comprehend something of what they were about, how they worked, and why.

I also began to realize something else. As I gradually became more adept with the materials I was teaching, I began to pay more attention to what my students were saying on their papers. One of the extra-textual messages that began to come through was that what they were learning wasn't necessarily what I was teaching. This didn't make sense to me--at least, not yet.

The most significant lesson from those two years was that, composition or no, this was the level on which I wished to teach for the rest of my career. But a B.A. in secondary education wasn't nearly enough background to guarantee that continuance. So I applied to and was accepted for graduate work at SUNY-Buffalo.

During the next four years I obtained my M.A., finished my course work and a second language requirement, passed my prelims and got about half of my dissertation written. One of my financial mainstays was a teaching assistantship teaching freshman composition, which U.B. required of all incoming freshmen. Now I was free to teach comp. in my own way. The first thing I did was to revert to a "readings in liberal education" text of the sort I'd had used on me in my own freshman year, one for which I had fond memories. But I soon discovered that while I was enjoying my readings and re-readings, I wasn't appreciably improving the writing skills of my students. While they were more mechanically adept than my junior-college writers, they didn't seem to have much more to say.

The English department tried to provide some guidance to neophyte teachers by organizing the TA's. From this attempt three approaches to composition evolved. One utilized either great books or great ideas; a second used student journals as text and product; a third, which I found most congenial, emphasized rhetoric and a readings text. All formal textual materials were of the TA's own choice. I found myself veering back to my junior-college-type texts. One step backward, two . . . .

A procedure designed to help us through these teaching experiences only made things more complicated for me. We had monthly TA late-afternoon gatherings at different faculties' houses, sharing coffee or beer depending on individual predilections and the professors' largesse. We also shared our teaching experiences of the previous weeks. We weren't shy with each other; we also took our teaching quite seriously. In the often heated discussions which came to accompany these 'giant seminars,' the question increasingly, disturbingly emerged: Whose approach was 'right'? The answers were at once useful and frustrating: all had good points, yet no single approach did everything. What to do--or, more appropriately, what to teach? and how??

A further complication came to light in an unexpected way. Near the end of my sojurn at Buffalo, I taught a pair of consecutive comp. classes in the night-school division of the university. My students

were polyglot--dropouts trying to redeem themselves, housewives, mill workers, immigrants, bored people, undereducated men and women of all kinds and sorts. But something unusual happened to--or with--some of the students in these classes. Because they were "nontraditional," though I didn't then know that that's what they were called, I loosened up considerably with my writing assignments for them. I let them pick from the text instead of assigning everything; at times when they could convince me of its appropriateness, I let them design an assignment themselves. I, who had been afraid to let my students get into the content of their own lives for subject matter to write about, was now--at times--encouraging it. And to my surprise, once they began to work past their fear of the subject--and, by extension, me--many of them, despite their sometimes atrocious grammar, had something to say. Why was this? How was it that despite their lack of formal training they were able to be more cogent, more sensible, more intelligent, more profound than their school-trained, continually-formally-educated, supposedly "smarter" juniors? I was delighted to see it happening, but I didn't yet understand it--although I was beginning to develop some acute suspicions about the relationships between living and writing as well as about academic training and writing. Drudge work though the university may have regarded the teaching of composition, the varied experiences I had at Buffalo provided me with some important practical underpinnings for my own composition teaching.

In the fall of 1969, seven years after this compositional process had begun, I left Buffalo for a full-time position at Clarion State College, now Clarion University of Pennsylvania. That first year I completed my dissertation on Robert Lowell and received my doctorate. Since then, composition has become an integral part of my professional life. I became a member, then the chair of the department composition committee. During that time through the mid-seventies, I taught, then helped design highly structured, then unstructured, then compromise approaches to composition courses. I helped design, then taught, our basic composition course for a number of years. I helped to develop and I now teach our three creative writing courses. I have waded through composition texts by the hundredweight and I have read, responded to and graded about two thousand writers and about thirty thousand written performances in these last two-plus decades.

I have seen much change in myself and in composition over that time. In the late nineteen-seventies, I helped to lay the groundwork for our department-sponsored writing laboratory and helped to hire its first composition-trained director. I have learned about peer tutoring. I have become acquainted with sentence combining and with T-units. I have participated in several schemes to assess incoming freshmen so that they might be more effectively placed in writing courses suited to their abilities. I have seen other, more specialized writing courses come into being, staffed by composition professionals trained in disciplines which did not

exist when I came out of graduate school. I have watched with delight as the department augmented the writing center with a computer lab; I have both "pushed" my writing students to use the Apple IIc's, and I have myself learned the rudiments of the machine. This presentation comes to you with the devoted assistance of WordPerfect 5.1. We have now on campus an active Writing Across the Curriculum program, ably directed by a staff member who also oversees the writing lab. So much has happened since 1970. As I list these events and developments, I am amazed at their scope and complexity in such a short period of time.

I, too, have changed and, I hope, grown during that time. For several years I depended heavily upon a textbook to get me through my initial inadequacies in the comp. classroom. But as time passed I gradually became more and more dissatisfied with texts. More and more I supplemented them with student-generated samples of writing. For the last several years now I have used no commercial text at all but rather a continuous stream of student-writing handouts supplemented with my own. If individual students need particular kinds of mechanical assistance,i.e. some help with "traditional" grammar, I'll either use my own textual resources with them or send them with a diagnostic note to our Writing Center. This approach seems to work reasonably well.

As I have grown less afraid of my students--a condition it took me some time to admit to--I have begun to experiment with techniques which my newer colleagues have brought to the classroom with them. I have made some acquaintance with the likes of Peter Elbow and Linda Flower, with Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon. I have attended a number of workshops on the teaching of composition over the last several years. I am learning about the "process" approach to composition.

These efforts at professional enhancement have borne fruit. I use free-writing exercises. I use my own versions of small-group techniques during early and intermediate writing stages of an assignment; I do some limited one-on-one assessments of their works-in-progress. I encourage revision and re-revision as much as I can bring myself to do. I try to incorporate these strategies into my creative writing classes as well as into composition teaching.

But I must also admit to reprobate status--some of my newer colleagues would probably have sterner words for it--in some of the things I still do in comp classes, and in fact with all of my writing demands on my students (and myself as well). I demand a final product, and I let them know that there will be a time when the grade on that product will stand. There are always several of those "products," and their grades will be compendia of those products. I know it's old-fashioned to do so, but in the world in which I must function and in the worlds in which they, too, will be expected to function, that is the standard to which they will be

held accountable. I do them no favors if I do not at least make them acquainted with that standard; it is the one with which they will live their lives. I also set deadlines, and I penalize them, sometimes heavily, if they do not meet them. I make sure that they know those policies well in advance, for I disseminate them in writing at the beginning of the courses. Once I do, I adhere to them.

I still teach rhetoric, too. Oh, it's not the Corder-and-Kendall rendition to which I made reference a few minutes ago; I've modified that extensively over the years. But I've come to know it reasonably well during that time, far better than any other system I'm acquainted with. It works for me, and I can demonstrate to them how that happens, with my work and theirs, too, with some success. I teach this modified rhetorical framework because I believe that if I can provide them with structurally recognizable patterns which they can take with them and adapt to a variety of writing situations, then I'll have done them a genuine service. That is one of the few real services which I feel that I have within my ability to provide to my writing students.

For I have finally learned that I do not, cannot teach them "how to write." That has been the slowest, most frustrating lesson I have had to learn about myself and composition. Not until I had given up on the impossible notion that I had to make knowledgeable, even sophisticated writers out of my students, did I begin to look forward to walking into a comp. class and concentrate on what I could do reasonably well with them. No longer do I try to do everything and wind up doing it all half-baked. Instead I have identified those elements of the writing process which I feel that I know well enough to be able to teach to others, and this is where I concentrate my efforts.

For I cannot teach them "how to write." I cannot do that because I do not know all that there is to know about the processes involved. What I do know about, identifiable elements of recognizable structures, what I call the "science" of writing--yes, I can help others with those things. If they'll let me. But that part of the process I call "art"--the topic selection, the individual parameters which an idea becomes and how it unfolds in a writer's mind and heart and guts, the specific word selections s/he chooses and the patterns in which s/he orders them--I might as well assume that I can teach the wind how to blow. Recognizing my own limitations in a writing class, and learning to accept and work with them, was the best and the most difficult lesson I have learned in my compositional career.

Perhaps the most important single thing which I can "teach" to any of my prospective writers is not a matter of technique at all. The biggest barrier most of my students have to face is not their inabilities but their own fears. They are afraid to write when they

come to college, and by extension they are afraid of me because I am the writing teacher. This is sad and ironic and any number of bad things, because for all of our sophisticated machine developments in the transmission of language we still have only two ways in which to generate it. Thank heavens for those night students at the University of Buffalo, for it was they who first planted that recognitional seed in my brain. Older students continue to confirm that lesson. They are usually more quickly able to overcome that "fear of writing" and get immediately into the business of saying what they have to. I think that this is because they have lived long enough to have validated themselves to themselves and believe that they do indeed have something worth saying, or at least something that they want and need to say. Hence I have an easier time reaching them than I do their younger counterparts. But it is most important to try to get that message through to all of my potential writers: you must learn not to be afraid of writing, not to be afraid of yourselves. Ironically, by about semester's end they begin to loosen up with me and with themselves, just in time to complete the course and be done with composition, often forever. So it becomes time to initiate the process all over again.

This matter of the importance of attitudes isn't new with me, but it's a comfort to find it confirmed. I'm reminded of the ending of Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (Bantam, 1981). The narrator and his son Chris are very near the end of their trip, and they have just passed a milestone in reconstructing their relationship. Chris has expressed an interest in obtaining a motorcycle when he is older, this machine which has been metaphor and symbol for so much during the novel. His father assents, as long as Chris is willing to care for it properly. Chris asks if his dad will teach him how to do all these things, and his father agrees. Then Chris asks, "Is it hard?" His dad replies, "Not if you have the right attitudes. It's having the right attitudes that's hard." Chris ponders this for awhile, then asks his father if he'll have the right attitudes. His father affirms that Chris will.

But the narrator's right--for Chris, for himself, for my students, and for me, having the right attitudes is probably the hardest part of all.

I'm still working on those.

Clarion University of Pennsylvania